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Report from the Field: Lillie May Carroll Jackson School for Girls: Baltimore's Public-Private School Partnership
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Independent schools are uniquely positioned to make a difference in the public domain. Given the societal turf independent schools occupy, the considerable resources they command, and the powerful network of caring and influential people they attract, independent schools have the opportunity – and, I believe, the obligation – to do more than educate 1.5 percent of our nation's children exceptionally well.

They [the public schools] also believe, quite rightly, that independent schools have much to learn from them, beginning with how to serve truly diverse populations of students and how to teach to the full range of learning styles and learning differences.

-Al Adams

[*The Public Purpose of Private Schools*, 2000](#)

The relationship between America's various school sectors - district, charter, Catholic, independent, Jewish, etc. - can be complex. District and charter schools contend for public dollars and moral standing, while the worlds of independent and religious schools rarely interact with either. An exception to the rule exists in Baltimore.

Lillie May Carroll Jackson School for Girls is a charter school that came about from a partnership between Baltimore City Public Schools and Roland Park Country School (RPCS), a 110-year-old independent school in Baltimore. The planning process occupied five years and took place across incremental collaborations and mediated conversations between the two communities.

Lillie May opened its doors in August 2015. Enrollment is *via* randomized lottery and open to all Baltimore City girls, grades 5 to 8. The school represents a geographic cross-section of Baltimore but disproportionately serves low-income, chronically underperforming students, most of whom are African-American.

Baltimore's Education Landscape

Baltimore City consistently ranks near the bottom of Maryland's school districts on state assessments and near the bottom of all urban districts on the nationally representative National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Before 2015, Maryland administered the Maryland School Assessments (MSA grades 3-8) and High School Assessments (HSA grades 9-12). [Data from 2014](#) showed an increasing number of students in grades 3-8 performing at the "Basic" level and a decreasing number performing at "Proficient" and "Advanced" levels. In 2015, Maryland fielded the new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments. Education experts

predicted PARCC scores would be lower in the first year, but the [results in Baltimore City were staggeringly so](#). Further, the 2015 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), administered in twenty-one cities for the Trial Urban District Assessments (TUDA), [showed Baltimore](#) third from the bottom in 4th grade reading and fourth from the bottom in 8th grade reading, against peer cities.

At the same time, the state of Maryland, as a whole, [performs above the national average](#). One in twenty Maryland students attends an independent school, and the suburban public schools are highly regarded. The contrast between Maryland's low-income, minority students and their middle- and upper-income peers – many of whom are white – is therefore acute.

A Call to Independent Schools

In 2008 Andres Alonso, then CEO of Baltimore City Public Schools, challenged independent school leaders to bring their expertise in operating rigorous, high-expectations schools into the public square. His hope was to establish a new type of school that offered an innovative environment for Baltimore's students. A working group, comprised of public and private school leaders, formed in 2010 with the intention of bringing Alonso's vision to life.

One organization proved particularly important in this effort: Middle Grades Partnership. Since 2005, Middle Grades Partnership had convened independent and public schools to provide summer remediation and enrichment programs. Faculty from both sectors staffed the programs. Over time, Middle Grades Partnership had generated significant relationships and common experiences upon which the working group could build. Additionally, leaders from various public-private school partnerships – such as [Private Schools with Public Purpose](#) and the subsequently constituted [National Network of Schools in Partnership](#) – offered consultations and support.

The working group collaborated on the school's design, including curriculum, culture, assessments, and enrichment. The group selected Expeditionary Learning as the school's instructional partner. Expeditionary Learning (EL) seeks to cultivate depth of knowledge within core content areas and integrates the disciplines wherever possible – an approach that resonates with independent school practices. A domain such as Greek and Roman culture might find students working with the Pythagorean theorem (math), reading mythology (language arts), learning about the location of Greece and bordering countries (geography), exploring archeology and dating civilizations (science/history), and hand-crafting jewelry that reflects the period (arts). The model is flexible enough to respond to student needs; Lillie May's teachers decided to keep math as a stand-alone class rather than to integrate it into the other subjects.

Additionally, EL schools plan two annual “expeditions,” in which students focus on specific topics and carry them out into their communities. The expedition culminates in a final project that serves the community in concrete ways. For instance, one of Lillie May's first-year expeditions was entitled “Researcher in the Rain Forest.” Students examined many aspects of the rain forest, including the role of insects in the ecosystem. They read primary sources on entomology and biographical sketches from entomologists. In the end, the students produced a field guide to insects in Baltimore County's Patapsco State Park, a resource complete with illustrations and detailed descriptions.

Lillie May is an EL partner school, which means the school implements the entire EL educational model – not only the curriculum, but also other distinguishing EL features such as student-led assessments and all-school, structured gatherings (“Crew”). Over time, Lillie May intends to transition from an EL affiliate to a fully credentialed EL school.

Operational Challenges

Establishing open communication between the public and private sectors proved an ongoing challenge. With few exceptions, district employees and teachers expressed doubts about the capacity of independent school leaders to understand, much less respond to, the academic and social challenges associated with low-income children. On the private school side, principals and their boards held a generally negative view of the caliber of district teachers, students, and curricula.

Collaboration *among* the private schools proved to be another challenge. Baltimore’s independent schools have not, historically, exchanged ideas and practices; they tend to view one other as competitors, not partners.

Financing the process and the start-up phase posed a third problem. The independent schools covered most of the planning costs, with the help of one Baltimore foundation and one individual. Once launched, Lillie May’s funding streams remained insecure. The United States Department of Education does provide charter school funding of up to \$500,000, distributed across one year of planning and two years of operation. Because Lillie May is single-sex, however, the Department had to ensure it did not violate Title IX of the Code of Federal Relations, Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits the award of public funding to schools that discriminate on the basis of gender. Lillie May’s team had to establish that comparable, all-boy educational opportunities existed in Baltimore. The school has overcome this hurdle and expects to receive the first portion of the start up funding by June 20, 2016 - two years after the charter was granted and one year after launch.

Overcoming the Challenges

The first task was to break down implicit biases. Representatives from each of the five participating independent schools met throughout the spring of 2010. They heard from speakers who occupied different spaces within the public education realm: operators and directors of charter and transformation schools (charter-like schools opened during the tenure of Dr. Alonso), special education experts, the Director of Maryland State Board of Education Approved Alternative Preparation Program, and others. These meetings allowed both sides to appreciate their commonality of purpose, goals, and practices. A relationship of trust began to develop as the two groups shared stories, expressed frustrations, and developed an admiration for each other’s work that dispelled long-held misconceptions. In the end, this became a deeply personal shared vision.

The independent school contingent also visited public schools, observed classroom teaching, and met with teachers and principals who shared the challenges of teaching in urban settings. District leaders expressed concern that independent schools were not equipped to deal with issues such as chronic absenteeism, classrooms that encompassed a wide range of academic and social backgrounds, and an unwieldy, bureaucratic system. Indeed, the independent schools’ leadership

came to share this concern to such an extent that, in the end, Roland Park Country School submitted the charter application alone.

In June 2013, five years after Alonso's challenge, Roland Park Country School was granted the nation's first charter awarded to an independent school. Lillie May opened its doors in August 2015 to 79 rising sixth-grade girls. Lillie May's initial assessments helped place students in either the 5th or 6th grade, but all are in the "5/6 track." Some girls will advance to the 7th grade in September 2016, but others will remain in the 5/6 track for another year. The goal is to provide four years of middle school, for girls who need it, without their repeating a grade. Lillie May's inaugural class is 99% African American. Fifteen percent of the students are classified as having disabilities, and 89.5% qualify for free and reduced lunch. The girls come from twenty different zip codes and 38 different elementary schools. Lillie May is a Title 1 Targeted Assistance School.

Snapshot of the First Year

Lillie May's inaugural year suggests positive results. The first iReady assessment, administered in August, showed that none of the girls performed at grade level and 87 % performed at 4th grade level or below. On the May assessment, fourteen scholars were at grade level, four having grown one grade and ten having jumped two. Bringing all the girls to their potential is a long-term process: currently, 36% of scholars test at the fifth grade level, and 44.5% are below.

The principal and teachers report an increasingly positive school culture. They attribute this to Crew meetings that are held at the beginning and end of each school day. Crew offers routine, structured opportunities for the girls to air grievances. This practice has, in most instances, prevented nascent conflicts from escalating.

The partnership allowed Lillie May and Roland Park girls to experience academic and social exchanges organically, as devised by the girls themselves. During this first year, a shared sports field day led to shared arts, theatre, and dance days. Lillie May girls became reading partners with lower school Roland Park girls, sharing books and building relationships. Having watched these successes, the administrations of both schools intend to increase the frequency of interactions (among students and faculty) in Year 2. In the meantime, faculty from Roland Park and Lillie May are coordinating this summer's Middle Grades Partnership program.

Lillie May was founded with the hopes of breaking down barriers and opening pathways for learning between Baltimore's public and independent school sectors. Although the process had its difficulties, the end result has enriched both schools immeasurably. As districts across the country look for creative ways to serve their students, partnerships between public and private schools offer a promising model to consider.

Jeannette Karpay served as the lead consultant throughout the planning process and sits on the board of Lillie May Carroll Jackson School for Girls.